Western Theory and Chinese Reality

Zhang Longxi

1

Lu Xun, fiction writer, essayist, and foremost iconoclast in modern Chinese history, whose observations of the Chinese national character strike us today as no less shrewd and insightful than they were half a century ago, once caricatured the Chinese resistance to anything "foreign." The Chinese, he wrote in 1934, developed a strong enmity against what they called an ostentatious foreign air [*yang qi*]—that is, things or attitudes that seemed un-Chinese and therefore were to be shunned by all Chinese patriots:

> And because we have been suffering from aggression for years, we make enemies to this "foreign air." We even go one step further and deliberately run counter to this "foreign air": as they like to act, we

An earlier version of this essay was presented in November 1991 at the Center for Ideas and Society, the University of California, Riverside, and at UCLA's Focus Research Unit of Critical Studies and the Human Sciences. I would like to thank Bernd Magnus, director of the center at Riverside; Murray Krieger, the center's first Distinguished Visiting Faculty Fellow; and the fall 1991 resident fellows there as well. I am also thankful to Vincent Pecora and Leo Ou-fan Lee for inviting me to UCLA and for helpful comments. Lothar von Falkenhausen and Ye Yang read the first draft and offered me much moral support. To Perry Link I owe a special note of appreciation for his encouragement and his most helpful suggestions.

All translations from the Chinese are mine.

Critical Inquiry 19 (Autumn 1992)

> would sit still; as they talk science, we would depend on divination; as they dress in short shirts, we would put on long robes; as they emphasize hygiene, we would eat flies; as they are strong and healthy, we would rather stay sick.[1]

This is, of course, exaggeration, but the antagonistic mentality sketched out here still forms to a large extent the cultural and political ambience in which foreign ideas and theories must find themselves when they travel, transfer, or migrate to China.

Indeed resistance, as Edward Said observes, is "an inevitable part of acceptance" that ideas and theories must encounter when they travel to a new cultural environment.[2] In Lu Xun's day, traditional Confucian mores formed the core of Chinese resistance to foreign ideas; today the ideological principles of the Chinese Communist Party, in the face of a disintegrated Soviet Union and a chaotic Eastern Europe, have become the last bulwark of world communism and undertake to guard jealously communism's ideological purity. In both cases, past and present, the resistance to foreign ideas and theories is propped up by the pretensions of a nationalism already bankrupt in ideas. In this we may find an explanation for the successive waves of political campaigns against Western "spiritual pollution" and "bourgeois liberalization," campaigns that punctuated, since the end of the Cultural Revolution in the late seventies, a period of recent Chinese history that was also the period of an official policy of openness and economic reform. The spasmodic rhythm of these campaigns is symptomatic of a peculiar political situation, the circumstances of all literary and cultural activities in China, a situation dominated by the tension between the desire for a modern economy and the fear of any structural change in the distribution of power and in social hierarchy, between a sinicized Marxism as the official ideology of the Communist party and any foreign, especially Western, ideas and theories. Without bearing this political background in mind, any discussion of the "traveling" of Western theory to and in China would make little

1. Lu Xun, "Cong haizi de zhaoxiang shuo qi" ["Reflections Starting from My Son's Photographs"], *Lu Xun quanji* [*The Complete Works of Lu Xun*], 20 vols. (Beijing, 1973), 6:84.

2. Edward W. Said, "Traveling Theory," *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), p. 227; hereafter abbreviated "TT."

Zhang Longxi is assistant professor of comparative literature at the University of California, Riverside. He is the author of *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century Theories of Literature* (1986; in Chinese) and *The Tao and the Logos: Literary Hermeneutics, East and West* (1992). His most recent contribution to *Critical Inquiry* is "The Myth of the Other: China in the Eyes of the West" (Autumn 1988).

sense, and understanding the significance of Western theory as well as its reception among Chinese intellectuals would be very difficult, if not totally impossible.

In Lu Xun's caricature, activeness and an emphasis on science and on physical and mental health—in other words, the positive qualities in those pairs of contrasting values—are all allocated to the side of the "foreign." Understood as mere exaggeration, as the satirist's incorrigible propensity toward irony, witticism, and hyperbolic language, this can be easily brushed aside with a knowing, tolerant smile, and thus does not touch off serious thoughts. Caricatures, however, always have a point; they always expose and highlight by their very distortion and exaggeration. Lu Xun's point, of course, is to goad the Chinese into a more reflective thinking about what it means to be Chinese, a critical consciousness that would not only abandon the simplistic antagonism to foreign ideas but would reclaim what may be inherently Chinese, or to "grab" from foreign cultures whatever is good for China. "Without grabbing, a man cannot automatically become a new man," says Lu Xun; "without grabbing, literature and art cannot automatically become new literature and new art."[3] The essence of this grabism [*nalai zhuyi*], as Lu Xun calls it, is an active effort to take from foreign cultures what is good and useful to the Chinese, and it is this activeness that differentiates grabism from a passive acceptance of colonial impositions that come with foreign gunboats: "opium from Britain, derelict guns from Germany, French perfumes, American movies, and all sorts of Japanese junk that says 'Made in China.'"[4]

In this connection, then, perhaps the "traveling" of Western theory to China, with which I am concerned in this essay, may be redefined as the Chinese "grabbing" of Western theory in an entirely different situation and for entirely different purposes from what Western theory may find at home. Friedrich Schleiermacher once remarked that the translator of a foreign work can either ask the reader to go to the foreign author or bring the foreign author to the reader back home.[5] Insofar as Western theory is concerned, Chinese translation is never motivated by a mere tourist interest of sight-seeing in a foreign culture but is rather determined by the need one feels in China, the need to "grab" the foreign author home through translation and to open a window onto the outside world in this suffocating "iron house," to borrow yet another of Lu Xun's famous expressions.[6] Redefining the dissemination of Western theory in China as an exercise of Chinese grabism immediately shifts the ground and changes

3. Lu Xun, "Nalai zhuyi" ["Grabism"], *Lu Xun quanji,* 6:47.

4. Ibid., p. 45.

5. See Friedrich Schleiermacher, "On the Different Methods of Translation," trans. André Lefevere, in *German Romantic Criticism,* ed. A. Leslie Willson (New York, 1982), p. 9.

6. Lu Xun, "Nahan zixu" ["Preface to *A Call to Arms*"], *Lu Xun quanji,* 1:274.

the horizon or perspective from which we may ask questions and make evaluations—not from the point of origin where Western theory embarks on a journey abroad but from its destination, the point of origin in reverse, where the need for the translation and assimilation of Western theory is felt in the first place.

The very fact that Lu Xun was able to advocate grabism, however, proves that there is always some intellectual space, even in an "iron house," for the assimilation of foreign ideas and theories right in the middle of resistance and antagonism. Indeed, his grabism must be understood as an act of antagonism in itself—that is, as an active choice in opposition to imperialist culture and to the institutionalized official Chinese culture of his time. What Lu Xun attacks in his caricature is thus not antagonism per se but the specific kind of antagonistic mentality the official culture systematically inculcates and propagates across the entire social spectrum. His grabism, on the other hand, advocates a kind of antagonism that redraws the lines between the opposite sides and shifts both the Chinese and the foreign into a new alignment in which the foreign tends to aid the unofficial in opposition to the official Chinese culture.

It is in the context of this official versus unofficial antagonism that we must understand the introduction of foreign literary theory to China. For his time, Lu Xun introduced the work of Anatoli Lunacharsky and Georgy Plekhanov into China (indirectly, from Japanese translations), taking them to be the leading Marxist critics and theorists.[7] After the Cultural Revolution, Western theory of all kinds—from formalism, New Criticism, and structuralism, to hermeneutics, reception theory, deconstruction, as well as feminism and Western Marxism—generated a great deal of attention and enthusiasm among Chinese scholars and stu-

7. For an illuminating analysis of Lu Xun's complicated relationship with left-wing writers, Marxist aesthetics, and Soviet literature, see Leo Ou-fan Lee, *Voices from the Iron House: A Study of Lu Xun* (Bloomington, Ind., 1987), pp. 151–72. As Lee points out, in his time and mainly through secondhand Japanese sources of information, Lu Xun "could never have conceived of the 'new epoch' [of Soviet literature] as ushering in two decades of Stalinist bureaucracy and terror" (p. 154); moreover, the tight control of literary expression as we know it later, the "pervasive impact of the so-called *partinost* (party spirit), to the extent of dictating to writers what and how to write, simply did not exist in China in Lu Xun's time" (p. 165). It therefore becomes an intriguing hypothetical question many Chinese intellectuals often ask themselves: what and how would Lu Xun write had he lived to see the complete marginalization of intellectuals, the tightening of ideological control, and the incessant political campaigns since the early fifties in which many of his close friends and disciples—Hu Feng, Feng Xuefeng, and others—were purged and branded as counterrevolutionaries or rightists? Mao Tse-tung himself once answered this question by making a remark to the effect that Lu Xun would not dare to write the way he did if he were alive in 1957 when the antirightist campaign was raging over China. But even in his Yenan talks of 1942, as Merle Goldman argues, Mao already rejected Lu's satirical style of writing as "inappropriate for life in a Communist society" (Merle Goldman, "The Political Use of Lu Xun in the Cultural Revolution and After," in *Lu Xun and His Legacy*, ed. Lee [Berkeley, 1985], p. 181).

dents of literature. In a short span of five or six years, roughly fifty or sixty years worth of Western theories were introduced to Chinese readers, and all these theories willy-nilly found themselves to be both foreign and Western and thereby acquired an oppositional status with radically subversive implications—that is, potentially dangerous as "spiritual pollutants" in the Chinese political atmosphere.

In a totally alien environment shaped by very different courses of events, Western theories tend to lose the urgency of their internal distinctions and become strange bedfellows in spite of themselves. For example, the Chinese translation of *Theory of Literature* by René Wellek and Austin Warren appeared in Beijing in 1984, and its emphasis on the "intrinsic" study of literature was extremely welcome to Chinese literature and criticism, which were desperately trying to break away from the grip of political determinism, the tenets of the official cultural policy based on Mao Tse-tung's 1942 Yenan talks and his theory of class struggle. At the same time, Fredric Jameson's series of lectures given at Peking University in 1985, translated and published in book form in 1986 as *Postmodernism and Cultural Theories* [*Houxiandai zhuyi yu wenhua lilun*], inspired many Chinese scholars in their own critique of culture and tradition. Their crucial differences notwithstanding, all the Western theories contributed to what Liu Zaifu, one of China's leading critics and former director of the Institute of Literature in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, called a methodological breakthrough, the "expanding of mental space in literary studies."[8] Thus formalism and Western Marxism, like the other Western literary theories grabbed by Chinese scholars, all exert a liberating influence in China against a completely threadbare and ossified theory of class and class struggle that reduces all literature and criticism to a number of rigid formulas.[9]

In reading Liu's critical writings, we can have a sense of the strange but not surprising realignment of Western theories in China and the ambivalence with which Chinese critics face the sudden plethora of theoretical discourses. Liu is well known in China for his work on Lu Xun and

8. See Liu Zaifu, "Wenxue yanjiu siwei kongjian de tuozhan" ["The Expanding of Mental Space in Literary Studies"], *Wenxue de fansi* [*Reflections on Literature*] (Beijing, 1986), pp. 1–39.

9. First produced as a film and then adapted for the stage and made into one of the eight "revolutionary model plays" during the Cultural Revolution, the celebrated *Hongdeng ji* [*Story of a Red Lantern*] can serve as an example of the use of such Chinese formulas in literary and artistic expressions. The characters in the story—the grandmother, the father, and the daughter—are not related by blood but are members of three different families who have survived the persecution of their class enemy and have come together as one revolutionary unit. The point it makes is that class relationship is more important than—and replaces—traditional family relations in the consciousness of communist revolutionaries. To make that obvious point explicit is the business of criticism that analyzes the characters in terms of their class origin and the whole story in terms of class and class struggle.

especially for championing "the subjectivity of literature," the necessity for literature "to return to itself." Like many other Chinese scholars, Liu heartily welcomes the arrival of contemporary Western theories, in which he sees the possibility of constructing an entirely new critical apparatus that would help Chinese literature and criticism break away from the straitjacket of Maoist orthodoxy and reclaim an essentially human and humanistic subjectivity, which has been totally suppressed in the Maoist reification of abstract collectivity and in the name of class struggle and the "dictatorship of the proletariat." On the other hand, however, insufficient knowledge of any Western language seriously impedes Liu's understanding of Western theory and confines his critical vision to a limited horizon. His plea for subjectivity, for the autonomy of literature and literary studies, his humanistic interpretation of Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,* as well as his employment of a Hegelian terminology and some Western critical notions that have been long out of fashion, all seem to make him hopelessly outdated vis-à-vis the sophistication of contemporary Western theory. In fact, Liu himself is not unaware of the discrepancy between his own theory and that of the contemporary West. "The moving away from the object toward the subject," as he puts it, "and the centripetal direction of this movement are running in just the opposite direction to that of the centrifugal movement some Western sociological schools in literary studies are trying to attain at the present."[10] It may well be that just about everybody who is somebody in contemporary Western theory is associated, in one way or another, with what Liu calls "sociological schools," but that hardly matters to him. Liu does not apologize for the theoretical discrepancy; he does not even think much about it because he is writing for the Chinese in contemporary China, which runs in a direction opposite to that of the West, where the various "sociological schools" may or may not be flourishing.

This should give us pause in judging Liu Zaifu and his theory according to contemporary Western criteria. If we care to take a closer look at his advocacy of "subjectivity," for example, we can see that he is not bent on contradicting Michel Foucault or Jacques Derrida, whom he probably has never read either in the original or in translation, but that he is responding to a much more tangible local problem, namely, the Maoist subjugation of all individuals and individuality to the collective reification of class and class struggle. In this subjugation, Liu argues,

> all subjectivity (the human being) is defined as a being of class, as a screw on the class machine, and is required to be completely suited for, and to serve in, class struggle. With all individuality dissolved in class and class struggle, there appears a strange phenomenon that a

10. Liu, "Wenxue yanjiu ying yi ren wei zhongxin" ["Literary Study Should Put Human Being at the Center"], *Wenxue de fansi,* p. 46.

> human being totally loses initiative and personality, that is, loses that which makes a human being a human being.[11]

To define man as a screw on the class machine, Liu maintains, is to create a new absolute idea, a new determinism and even fatalism, because it conceives, of necessity, "all human behavior and psychology as derived from class struggle, and all that one says or does as already predetermined." When applied to characterization and description in literary works, this political determinism makes everything stereotyped and totally predictable as a sign of class attributes, reducing literature to a "semiotics of class."[12] From this dehumanizing mechanization and this entirely politicized "semiotics of class," Liu argues, it is imperative that the human being restore vital and independent subjectivity and that literature return to itself.

Incidentally, the dehumanizing concept of man as a screw on a machine, a metaphor reminiscent of the nightmarish vision of the impersonal numbers in Evgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), or the faceless Gammas, Deltas, and Epsilons hatched in "conditioning centers" in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), is neither invented by Liu nor borrowed from Western literature or theory. It is, rather, borrowed directly from a homemade political slogan that is viewed *positively* and understood without irony in Mao's China, namely, the party's call to every Chinese to learn from Chairman Mao's good soldier Lei Feng and to be content as a "revolutionary screw" [*geming de luosiding*].[13] First announced in the early sixties, this call to mechanization was reissued more recently after the army had fired on thousands of Chinese civilians and students in Beijing in the fateful June of 1989.

Quite ironically, Liu's condemnation of the dehumanization of man sounds very much like Georg Lukács's condemnation of the alienation of human life and labor so brilliantly recapitulated in Said's essay on traveling theory: the process of reification under capitalism radically transforms "everything human, flowing, processual, organic, and connected into disconnected and 'alienated' objects, items, lifeless atoms"; the "mechanically objectified 'performance' of the worker [is] wholly separated from his total human personality," as human existence itself is "reduced to an isolated particle and fed into an alien system," while the same ruthless

11. Ibid., p. 48.

12. Liu, "Lun wenxue de zhutixing" ["On the Subjectivity of Literature"], *Wenxue de fansi*, pp. 64–65.

13. Like many other terms used in the Chinese Communist party's political rhetoric, the "screw" metaphor may have a Soviet origin. Joseph Stalin, in a toast at the 1945 Kremlin reception in honor of World War II heroes, compared the Soviets to " '"screws" that keep our large state mechanisms in a state of readiness in all areas of science, economics and the military' " (quoted in Evgeny Dobrenko, "The Literature of the Zhdanov Era: Mentality, Mythology, Lexicon," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 90 [Spring 1991]: 335). Neither Stalin nor Mao specified, however, who was or who held the screwdriver.

alienation happens to intellect, or "the subject," as well ("TT," pp. 230–31). I said "ironically" because socialism is supposed to end the alienation of man under capitalism; in reality, however, we find that man was born integral but is everywhere in alienation, including in socialist China and the erstwhile Soviet Union. Moreover, it is ironic because, for Lukács, class consciousness is precisely what enables the subject to break through the spiritual torpor, the numbing effect of reification and alienation, since "class consciousness," as Said puts it, "is thought thinking its way through fragmentation to unity; it is also thought aware of its own subjectivity as something active, energetic, and, in a profound sense, poetic" ("TT," p. 233). For Lukács, then, it would perhaps be like a bad dream for class and class consciousness to become the very stuff that make up the repressive alienation of man and human subjectivity.

In China's politically charged atmosphere, the plea for subjectivity and the autonomy of literature is not outside the sphere of politics but very much at its center as a powerful articulation of the demand for intellectual freedom, and the humanist argument advanced by Liu and other Chinese critics proves to be more deeply and directly involved in social and political transformation than much of Western theory, despite the latter's rhetoric and claim to political relevance. The involvement of literary theory with political events, of scholarly argumentation with direct engagement, can be seen nowhere more clearly than in Beijing's Tiananmen Square in June 1989, when a powerful crisis suddenly put everyone, everything, and every theory to the test. Liu was one of the many intellectuals who publicly voiced their support for the students' demand for freedom and democracy; after the Tiananmen massacre, he was forced into exile together with some of his younger, more radical colleagues. Liu Zaifu and many other Chinese literary scholars, to put it simply, are not ivory-tower dwellers who talk about the autonomy of literature and the freedom of artistic expression only from a safe distance, somewhere outside history. They are men and women of enormous courage and moral integrity fighting for social justice and intellectual freedom in political actions.

The recent critique of Liu and others by the spokesmen of the Chinese ideological establishment may further help us understand the condition of literary theory in China today. One such critique pits Liu and Li Zehou, another influential Chinese theoretician, in direct opposition to Mao Tse-tung's *Talk at the Yenan Forum,* accusing them of encouraging "some literary and art works in the last two years" to "challenge socialist morality, law, and public opinion," and of "trumpeting bourgeois liberalization."[14] In pleading for the autonomy of literature and literary studies,

14. Yan Zhaozhu, "Lun wenyi de mei de qinggan: chongdu *Zai Yan'an wenyi zuotanhui shangde jianghua*" ["On the Feeling of Beauty in Literature and Art: Rereading *Talk at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art*"], *Wenyi yanjiu* [*Literature and Art Studies*], no. 4 (July 1990): 9.

the critique continues, Liu and Li are advocating "independence from the politics of the proletariat, which not only means to lead literature and art into the formalist impasse but to throw themselves wittingly or unwittingly into the arms of bourgeois politics," which amounts to no less a crime than treason: "the betrayal of the politics of the proletariat and the people, and the propagation of the politics of bourgeois liberalization."[15] Such a political analysis is accurate in the sense that it shows what is at stake in the theoretical debate in China, but it is not accurate in pretending to speak on behalf of the "proletariat" and the "people" when it is in fact speaking for a totalitarian regime.

2

If the students' demonstration and the ensuing massacre in Beijing constitute one of the most important political events in recent Chinese history, they also present an enormous challenge to all the different theories to provide an account, analysis, interpretation, and engagement. It has indeed generated a great deal of discussion in the whole world, and there is certainly no lack of insightful analysis in terms of social and political history. Insofar as literary theory is concerned, however, there is a peculiar silence about all this, not just in China, where the whole thing is taboo, but also in the West. It is even more disturbing to see that in what little analysis there is the attempt often makes one wonder how much real understanding critics in the West may have of Chinese reality.

A case in point is an essay by W. J. T. Mitchell in which we find a photograph of Mao's statue and another of the "Goddess of Liberty" that the Chinese students erected in Tiananmen Square shortly before the bloody crackdown. Brought together to confront one another in two consecutive pages, these two images immediately set the stage for some incisive observations and commentaries. It turns out that Mitchell just uses the destruction of the statue made by the Chinese students as an example to introduce his argument that in America there is legal and political control of public art just as in China. He quotes the Chinese government's warning to the students that "'even in the United States statues need permission before they can be put up.'"[16] The omnipresence of political control grants validity to this implicit analogy: "We may not have tanks mowing down students and their statues," says Mitchell, "but we are experiencing a moment when art and the public (insofar as it is embodied by state power and 'public opinion') seem on a collision course" ("VPA," p. 883). This is

15. Ibid., p. 10.

16. W. J. T. Mitchell, "The Violence of Public Art: *Do the Right Thing,*" *Critical Inquiry* 16 (Summer 1990): 880; hereafter abbreviated "VPA."

disappointing because the rather casual use of the Chinese example seems to trivialize the momentum of a great and tragic event, and also because the repetition of the phrase "even in the United States" not only verges on endorsing the Chinese government's view but also fails to understand the true meaning of that phrase coming out of government loudspeakers. By linking the Chinese students' "Goddess of Liberty" with the Statue of Liberty and the United States—in other words, with the "foreign" and "Western," with "bourgeois liberalization" and all the ominous political overtones—the government tried to depict the confrontation in Tiananmen not as an inevitable outcome of China's internal political problems but as a "counterrevolutionary turmoil" incited and manipulated by external forces, by some secret foreign agents, and thus provided a pretext for the tanks to roll in. Speaking to a rebellious young generation at the height of political confrontation, the Chinese government was not really interested, after all, in making a simple statement of truth about the United States.

Mitchell never claims to be a China specialist, and in his essay, which is not concerned with the "Goddess of Liberty" as such, the Chinese example is marginal, though he believes that the Beijing massacre, the statue, and its destruction are "full of instruction for anyone who wants to think about public art and, more generally, about the whole relation of images, violence, and the public sphere" ("VPA," pp. 880–81). Mitchell does, however, provide a footnote that refers the reader to an essay by Rey Chow "for an excellent discussion of the way the events in China in June 1989 became a 'spectacle for the West'" ("VPA," p. 881 n. 2). The essay Mitchell recommends was published in *Radical America,* in a special issue entitled, quite appropriately, "China and Mexico: Rebellions at the Grassroots." By weaving the political events in Beijing into a rich textuality of the issues of gender and race, Orientalism, an analysis of two American movies (*King Kong* and *Gorillas in the Mist*), the deconstruction of democracy, a comment on Third World women, and a questioning of sinology, Chow's essay may easily be the most sophisticated analysis of the Chinese political situation that has been attempted so far, a rare specimen of the effort to respond to the "China crisis" from a perspective equipped with the most powerful discourses of literary and cultural theories the West has to offer. Chow's obvious familiarity with Western theory, her skillful deployment of analytical strategies, and her avowedly leftist political stance all make her essay exemplary of the most advanced kind of contemporary Western critical discourse, which appeals to critics like Mitchell. After reading it, however, I find myself in profound disagreement not only with her particular analysis of the events in Beijing but also, and more importantly, with the basic underlying assumptions that seem to me directly related to the whole issue of Western theory and Chinese reality, as well as to the nature of oppositional discourse within Western academia and in a broader context of global political confrontations.

Watching the massacre in Beijing is a traumatic experience that seems to defy theoretical analysis because, as Chow puts it, there is "nothing subtle, nothing reflexive, about a government gunning down its own, and for that matter, any people."[17] Reality, which so often seems intangible and hard to grasp, is suddenly thrust, so to speak, straight in our face by brute facts like people gunned down in the streets, and renders our theoretical discourse, which tends to doubt and reject the primacy of simple actuality, morally and emotionally inadequate. Theoretical analysis, however, is always able to go beyond the brute facts of violence and reach a high level of reflexive subtlety by putting in question the *representation* of violence. This is precisely what we see in Chow's essay, for very quickly the massacre in Beijing is exposed as imagery and representation on Western TV, as Western media's denigration of a non-Western Other, comparable to the imperialist agenda as symbolically represented by the subjugation of a monstrous gorilla in *King Kong*. The invading imperialists in this case are cameramen of the TV networks who, "like director Denim's film crew," went into China as "the unknown jungle with its dark, abominable secrets" and made her, "the 'other' (anti-U.S.) country," an ugly sight and a monster like King Kong for the West to watch and enjoy ("VOC," p. 25).

Any number of theoretical analyses of representation or mimesis will tell us that representation is an arbitrary play of signifiers that does not really refer or point to the signified, the referent, or whatever it is supposed to represent. Translating the massacre in Beijing into the language of TV and film and seeing the brute events as a popular movie thus turns out to be yet another performance of such theoretical analysis, which predictably discredits representation. The problem with such an ingenious use of theory, however, is that the brutal reality of massacre gets lost in the analysis, and that it not only collapses a crucial difference between the reality in China and the fictionality in *King Kong,* but has Chinese reality and its serious, extratextual substance displaced by Hollywood fictionality. The cameramen of Western TV are certainly not without their biases, but to claim that whatever appears on the TV is all made up by the Western media is not just to exaggerate the power of the media but simply to refuse to accept the reality that makes one feel ideologically uncomfortable. Indeed, in reading theoretical analyses of representation, just as in reading representation itself, one needs to keep an eye on the undeclared ideological motivations. The point is that the gunning down of Chinese civilians in Beijing is not only not subtle and not reflexive, but also not fictional. Unlike King Kong, those who were killed by machine guns and crushed by the metal bellies of tanks in Beijing did not die a metaphorical death.

Reality may be hard to grasp, but ideology seems more tangible.

17. Rey Chow, "Violence in the Other Country: Preliminary Remarks on the 'China Crisis,' June 1989," *Radical America* 22 (July-Aug. 1988): 24; hereafter abbreviated "VOC."

Without a single word analyzing the repressive measures that the Chinese authorities used to silence any dissenting voice and to eradicate any attempt at social and political change (which led to the mass protest in Tiananmen in the first place), to analyze "China watching" as Western media's invasion of China serves only to exculpate the Chinese government, to transmogrify a critical moment in the history of China into a "foreign" and "Western" conspiracy, and to turn the whole thing literally into a spectacle made in and for the West, a popular horror movie that might as well have been shot in Hollywood studios instead of the streets in Beijing. If the June 1989 Beijing massacre were indeed produced by "director Denim's film crew," one may wonder why the same crew failed to produce a spectacular dramatic denouement for the August 1991 Soviet coup? Why didn't they reproduce the successful Beijing scenario or simply issue a rerun of the Tiananmen footage, when they had a perfect chance to entice tanks to mow down those Muscovites? Shall we blame this anticlimactic ending on director Denim's bad taste in aesthetics, his vulgar interest in cheap poetic justice? But thinking in such cinematic terms may only represent a fetishizing of film theory, a reification of textuality that forgets or neglects the real political forces that shape the course—and discourse—of history.

The TV coverage of the events at Tiananmen, according to Chow, reenacts the Western colonialist and imperialist intervention in a Third World country, an intervention that evokes "the whole issue of extraterritoriality that has been present in Sino-Western relations since the mid-nineteenth century." China is invaded again, this time by "people like Ted Koppel or Tom Brokaw" with their "intrusive filming and reporting" ("VOC," p. 26). Notice that the issue is not that Western filming and reporting distort what really happened in China, since Chow gives no analysis of how, in their comments and discussions, Ted Koppel, Tom Brokaw, Dan Rather, or any other anchor, politician, or China expert misled the TV audience. In fact, without in some way acknowledging reality as the ontological world outside representation and its analysis, it is impossible for theoretical analysis to judge anything as misleading and distorting. The critique of Western media here is thus not epistemological but ideological—that is, the very act of filming and reporting is already intrusive, already an act of cultural or technological imperialism.

This is, of course, the standard position the Chinese government takes in matters of Sino-Western relations. The simplistic antagonism between Chinese and foreign that Lu Xun ridiculed in his caricature still serves to legitimize this position. An old Chinese witticism has it that whatever happens, one should never expose family ugliness to outsiders [*jiachou buke waiyang*]. In its modern form, as a principle the party urges the Chinese people to follow particularly in dealing with foreigners, the injunction becomes that the inside and the outside must have difference [*neiwai you bie*]. From the point of view of the Chinese general public,

then, the question here is not whether the corruption of the political system and all the other "dark, abominable secrets" of China are real or fabricated, but whether the Chinese would be better off if those secrets were to continue to be kept, and whether we would feel happy and satisfied if things were quietly rotten in China, if some of us could be arrested, jailed, and executed while everything looks pretty cheerful from the outside and nobody out here gives a damn. It is again Lu Xun who told us that "China had always practiced 'closed-doorism' so that we would never go out, nor would others be allowed in."[18] Presumably that was the situation in the good old days before the mid-nineteenth century, but one wonders whether it is desirable for China to relive that moment of cultural isolationism and, even if it is, whether it is still at all possible.

In putting up a statue in Tiananmen Square in defiance of the official warning, the Chinese students deliberately created an abomination to the government, a potent and provocative symbol that was destined to be interpreted by all. Although the students call their statue *minzhu nüshen,* which can only be translated into English as the "Goddess of *Democracy*"—not *Liberty*—the statue is identified as a replica of "Lady Liberty" by the American media to credit its creation to the influence of the West, and by the Chinese government to tie this symbol to the foreign and the Western. In the same issue of *Radical America* that features Chow's essay, Kay Johnson points out that it is the American media that has wrongly identified the Chinese statue as "a 'replica' of the Statue of Liberty," and that the goddess is unmistakably Chinese: "Her posture, apparel and facial features indicate that this was not an attempt to create a duplicate."[19] Joseph Esherick and Jeffrey Wasserstrom, two Westerners who viewed the events in Tiananmen as "political theater" and emphasize the symbolic meaning of such theatrical performance, also note that "though Western journalists often treated this twenty-eight foot icon as a simple copy of the Statue of Liberty, and the Chinese government insisted that this was so, the goddess was in reality a more complex symbol combining Western and Chinese motifs, some employed reverently, others ironically."[20] Based on a Chinese source, Wu Hung reports in a recent article that the student demonstrators in Beijing wanted at first to make a replica of the Statue of Liberty, but eventually "a Chinese image—a healthy young woman—was preferred instead."[21] Given the Chinese-foreign antagonism and the particular importance attached to names and naming in Chinese political practice, to ascertain the identity of the statue in Tiananmen becomes a

18. Lu Xun, "Nalai zhuyi," *Lu Xun quanji,* 6:44.

19. Kay Ann Johnson, "The Revolutionary Tradition of Pro-Democracy Students," *Radical America* 22 (July-Aug. 1988): 7, 12 n. 2.

20. Joseph W. Esherick and Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, "Acting Out Democracy: Political Theater in Modern China," *Journal of Asian Studies* 49 (Nov. 1990): 841.

21. Wu Hung, "Tiananmen Square: A Political History of Monuments," *Representations,* no. 35 (Summer 1991): 110.

pivotal point on which the judgment of the nature of the students' movement depends. There is no denying that the Statue of Liberty does hold a great attraction for the Chinese students, but the creation of a statue of their own is significant precisely because it shows the deepening of the students' self-understanding visibly articulated by this new Chinese image.

It seems strange that Rey Chow would ignore the Chinese name of the statue and insist that the Chinese symbol is a "replica of the Statue of Liberty" ("VOC," p. 26). But this seemingly wrong identification does something quite significant as a theoretical move, as a strategy in arguing specifically for a Third World feminist theory. This seeming misidentification relates the Chinese statue to the "symbolism of the white-woman-as-liberty," thereby revealing the scandalous fact that all Chinese, "from the astrophysicist Fang Lizhi, to workers, intellectuals, students, and the overseas communities," harbor an illusion about democracy symbolized by this white woman, that they all utter "a naive, idealistic clamor for democracy 'American style'" ("VOC," p. 27). So far as I know, Chow is the only one who has identified the Chinese "Goddess of Democracy" as a "white woman," and in doing so she clearly expresses her frustration that in the "degendered" Chinese clamor for freedom and democracy, the gender-specific Chinese woman or Third World woman is missing, that the Chinese students know nothing whatever about "the issues of gender and sexuality *and* their enmeshment in politics," and that the student leader Chai Ling "does not appear as 'woman' but as 'Chinese'" ("VOC," p. 28). When they "should" be fighting as women for women's causes—which might be the key to the solution to all of China's problems—Chai Ling and the other Chinese women, owing to their ignorance of Western theories, are thus "degendered" and are fighting not just as mere Chinese but for a cause very much flawed and doomed: the cause of democracy.

The point of debunking the Chinese "Goddess of Democracy" as a "fetish of the white woman," as Chow indicates, is to lead to a politically superior position of "deconstructing democracy" ("VOC," p. 27). That position is superior because it is empowered by a critical consciousness and theoretical reflection that are, unfortunately, "inaccessible to the Chinese who grew up on the Mainland in the past twenty to thirty years":

> They have been, precisely because of the cultural isolationism implemented by the Chinese government at different levels, deprived of the intellectual space that would allow them the kind of critical understanding I am suggesting. An emotional idealism that arises from desperation and that is displaced onto a fetish like the goddess of liberty is the closest they could come to a taste of freedom. There is yet no room—no intellectual room, no reflexive mobility—to understand the history in which the ideal of "democracy" deconstructs itself in the West. ["VOC," p. 28]

Here we may see the theoretical reason why the Chinese prodemocracy movement would necessarily fail, because even before it could be established in China, democracy has already deconstructed itself *in the West.* Worse still, simply by being what they are, Chinese on the mainland are invariably barred from recognizing democracy as the fraud and anachronism it really is, because it takes someone who has lived under democracy and has seen the worst of its abuses to begin to have the kind of critical understanding exemplified in Chow's essay. That is to say, only a Western critic can understand critically the problem of China. Having no lived experience of democracy and lacking a critical language and theoretical sophistication as defined in the West, the Chinese on the mainland can at best provide raw materials for the critic in the West to examine and analyze. It is impossible for them to reach the level of intellectual rigor and reflexive mobility that we find in Western theoretical discourse, just as it is impossible for King Kong to match the technological prowess of his colonialist captors. Here the twist of political and ideological alliance may seem rather bizarre, but it is not altogether incomprehensible because, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., puts it so succinctly, "to attempt to appropriate our own discourses by using Western critical theory uncritically is to substitute one mode of neocolonialism for another."[22]

But what if the mainland Chinese were demanding democracy *not* American style, *not* the democracy that has deconstructed itself in the West? In other words, can we think of the Chinese desire for democracy as a desire born on the Chinese mainland rather than a "foreign" and "Western" desire imported from the outside? In another issue of *Radical America,* Paul Thompson reports that among the demonstrators in Beijing, "the number who then believed that Western-style democracy was either desirable or possible was very small," and that the "lessons of democracy were learned on the streets. As traditional authority collapsed and physically disappeared, Beijing became an exhilarating city as people celebrated their capacity to govern everyday life."[23] If so, then "the lessons of democracy" in the streets of Beijing have little to do with democracy in the West. In fact, some Western scholars are even reluctant to grant the events of China's 1989 spring the name *democracy movement.* According to Esherick and Wasserstrom, "it would be hasty to associate *minzhu* (literally: 'rule of the people') with any conventional Western notion of democracy."[24] But one may argue that even if democracy in China must somehow follow a Western model, it will still be, when it materializes, a

22. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Editor's Introduction: Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985): 15.

23. Paul Thompson, "Democracy and Popular Power in Beijing," *Radical America* 22 (Sept.–Oct. 1988): 22, 23; hereafter abbreviated "DPP."

24. Esherick and Wasserstrom, "Acting Out Democracy," p. 837.

democracy as Chinese as the Yellow River. As Lu Xun observes, "the fact that we eat beef and mutton does not mean that we are turning ourselves into cows and sheep."[25] After all, isn't this the whole point of the traveling of theory? Isn't the dissemination of ideas in different cultures over and above antagonism and resistance one of the basic cultural experiences of our times? Unlike the whiteness of a white woman, democracy is not racially "overdetermined" in the genes; it can migrate to a different cultural environment and reach what Said describes as the fourth stage of its journey, when "the now full (or partly) accommodated (or incorporated) idea is to some extent transformed by its new uses, its new position in a new time and place" ("TT," p. 227).

Nevertheless, given the undeniable cultural isolation and theoretical ignorance of the young Chinese on the mainland, I should admit that there is indeed "no intellectual room, no reflexive mobility" in the Chinese mind to understand democracy and its self-deconstruction. That does not mean, however, that the Chinese mind on the mainland is totally empty—the mind, like nature, abhors a vacuum. If the intellectual room of the Chinese mind is not yet filled with knowledge of democracy and its failure, it is unfortunately filled with something quite as horrible, namely, the knowledge of the evil of totalitarianism. The young Chinese may not have enough Western education to know what democracy is and whether it is really what they want, but they certainly have enough Chinese experience to know what they do *not* want. In fact, their naive, idealistic clamor for democracy may be better described as a negative reaction to totalitarianism than a positive response to democracy. In this sense, then, it is perhaps justifiable to view, as Chow does, the volcanic agitation in Tiananmen during the demonstrations as nothing but "emotional idealism." In rebelling against a repressive totalitarian regime controlled by octogenarian communist leaders, the young Chinese may very likely have idealized the West as a projected image of their own dream of freedom and democracy. But is it fair to claim that only the Chinese should plead guilty of this "emotional idealism"? Has not the myth of the Other also found its way into the heart of the West and made many Westerners idealize China as the site of *their* dreams and utopias? The stern look of a truly critical consciousness will then have to demythologize the Other and desentimentalize the emotional idealism that obscures our vision of reality, the political reality that is so fundamentally different in one as from the other. China and the West—need we be reminded once again?—are two different worlds, and the traveling of theory from the one to the other may prove to be a very risky odyssey indeed.

25. Lu Xun, "Lun 'jiu xingshi de caiyong'" ["On 'the Use of Old Forms'"], *Lu Xun quanji,* 6:31.

3

The difference between the two worlds and the mutual idealization bring me back to the discrepancy mentioned earlier between Liu Zaifu's theory and its Western counterpart, and above all to my own discontent with an essay that appears excellent to Mitchell. As someone who tried to introduce contemporary Western literary theory to Chinese readers in the early eighties and has since been interested in Chinese-Western comparative studies of literature, I have no problem whatsoever with Chow " 'using Western theory on Chinese literature,' " and I certainly would not charge her with being " 'too Westernized,' " a charge she found both "moralistic" and "devastating," coming from some backwater quarters of sinology beclouded by the influence of Orientalism ("VOC," p. 31). What I find problematic in her essay, then, is not so much a misapplication of Western theory to the Chinese situation as the very context of her discussion, the ideological and political context from which she speaks in response to the so-called China crisis. Chow has clearly outlined this ideological context when she explains why she feels upset by the symbolism of the Chinese statue: "In the eyes of many U.S. leftist intellectuals, it is disturbing to see young Chinese students fighting for their cause with this symbolism. Don't they know what atrocities have been committed in the name of liberty and democracy? we ask implicitly or explicitly" ("VOC," pp. 27–28).

A simple answer to that question might be, first of all, that the Chinese statue was created in China and understood by the Chinese; that it was not meant to disturb American leftist intellectuals. And second, it is a bit strange and unfair, to say the least, to deny the Chinese their right to choose freedom and democracy simply because some American intellectuals find it disturbing, or because American imperialists and British colonialists have committed atrocities "in the name of liberty and democracy." The abuse of democracy does not invalidate the democratic ideal, and what the Chinese fight for is, of course, not the *name* but the *substance* of a democratic society.

A question one may put to the "U.S. leftist intellectuals"—whoever they are—is, why should they feel disturbed by the prodemocracy movement in China? This is precisely one of the questions the editors of *Radical America* are also asking. In the introduction to the special issue on China and Mexico, the editors express their mistrust of the Western media as well as their anxiety over "the either/or's through which China's crisis is being interpreted: socialism versus capitalism, communism or democracy." Such emotional as well as political reactions lead to a number of questions: "And yet, as Leftists, we are deeply troubled. Can we continue to insist that the vision of socialism we claim, inspired by Marx, is still to be realized, that none of the societies of 'actually existing

socialism' deserve their names, that Marxism continues to live, but only outside history?"[26]

These are indeed important questions we constantly face in the historical reality of our times and, like all important questions, they admit no easy answers. If one considers Marx's vision of the future communist society and his prophecy for the socialist revolution to happen in the most developed industrial countries in Western Europe and North America, one may well argue that none of the countries of "actually existing socialism" really resemble what Marx had in mind. I do not know whether this is turning Marxism into a mere futuristic theory outside history, but I do believe that it is not in the best interest of the American Left to turn a deaf ear to the cry for democracy and freedom in China as if they had a moral obligation to support the Chinese government simply because it calls itself Marxist. The name and the thing do not always go together, and the discrepancy between a Marxist rhetoric and a totalitarian realpolitik may account for the apparent logical absurdity that the leaders of a People's Republic could order the People's Liberation Army to kill its own people. In fact, in cases like this, Western literary theory may prove most helpful in revealing the difference between the name and the thing, the signifier and the signified, or the political rhetoric of a reified People and the average Chinese in reality. To ease the anxiety of some U.S. leftist intellectuals, it may be therapeutically necessary to show how the political symbolism of the People has deconstructed itself in China.

"Serve the People" is the title of one of Mao's short essays written before the party took over China, and it quickly became the core of a political rhetoric that has provided legitimation for the rule of the People's Republic since its founding in 1949. As the motto of the party, the five characters of this phrase are written on a big red wall facing the street at the Gate of New China [*Xinhuamen*], the main entrance to the huge compound where the party and government leaders take their residence in Beijing. The gilded Chinese scripts cast in bas-relief literally transform the wall into a gigantic quotation from Chairman Mao in his own handwriting, and designate the nature of the place as the residence of a People's government, while obliterating the old meaning of this place as the former palace of the emperor and the royal family. The palaces of Beijing have housed China's emperors since Kublai Khan in the thirteenth century, but the gate leading to the compound has been renamed to highlight the idea that those who now rule from here are no longer emperors of feudal China but leaders of New China, leaders of a proletarian revolution, the jealous guardians of the collective interest of all the Chinese people. Chairman Mao's dictum inscribed on the wall presents the guiding principle of this political theory as a primary text for every passerby to read; thus the gate with its new name and the wall with the inscription turn into

26. "Introduction," *Radical America* 22 (July-Aug. 1988): 3.

a sort of symbolic text, what Mikhail Bakhtin would call "material bearers of meaning" or "bodies of meaning," of which "even a simple brick . . . expresses something through its form."[27] What is expressed by the gate and wall is of course an emphatically denoted difference, or rather a desire for difference, between New China and her imperial past, a difference called for by the very location of the gate and wall that form the entrance to what was once an imperial palace.

Put in the Chinese context, the renaming of the gate is by no means trivial. The "rectification of names" [*zheng ming*], as Confucius maintains, ought to be the first step in administration because the proper word or name will indicate the appropriate nature of government policies and invest them with justification and legitimacy.[28] Here the name and the thing named are understood as one, and this politics of naming is essential to the politics of ruling. The place names in Beijing and elsewhere in China are thus thoroughly politicized; they all bespeak the political stability and social harmony under a benign government: *Xinhuamen* means "Gate of New China," *Tiananmen* means "Gate of Heavenly Peace," and *Changanjie,* the wide street leading to Tiananmen from both the east and west sides of the city, means "Avenue of Permanent Peace." Bearing such names, Chinese gates, walls, streets, and buildings weave into a gigantic geo-graphical text that inscribes the cultural myth of a perfect political order on the physical features of the land, a myth that renders the violent nature of power and domination almost transparent and invisible, and thereby fulfills, as Roland Barthes puts it, "the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal."[29]

In Beijing's urban iconography, the gate and wall of the government leaders' residence thus function as "material bearers of meaning," and what is changed by a new name and an added inscription is of course not their materiality but the meaning they bear. Instead of being part of an

27. M. M. Bakhtin, "Response to a Question from the *Novy Mir* Editorial Staff," in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays,* trans. Vern W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Tex., 1986), p. 6.

28. Tzu-lu said, "If the Lord of Wei left the administration of his state to you, what would you put first?"

The Master said, "If something has to be put first, it is, perhaps, the rectification of names."

Tzu-lu said, "Is that so? What a roundabout way you take! Why bring rectification in at all?"

The Master said, "Yu, how boorish you are. Where a gentleman is ignorant, one would expect him not to offer any opinion. When names are not correct, what is said will not sound reasonable; when what is said does not sound reasonable, affairs will not culminate in success. . . . The thing about the gentleman is that he is anything but casual where speech is concerned." [Confucius, *The Analects,* trans. D. C. Lau (Harmondsworth, 1979), bk. 13, sec. 3, p. 118]

29. Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," *Mythologies,* trans. and ed. Annette Lavers (1957; New York, 1972), p. 142.

imperial palace serving the emperor, they are now assigned a totally different function, a new meaning in the political rhetoric that designates the nature of the communist government as that of a public servant, one that operates to "Serve the People." Indeed, the elevated word *People* figures prominently in the language of New China, which is now the People's Republic governed with the force of a People's Liberation Army. The People, as every Chinese citizen learns in the numerous meetings and political study groups, are now masters of the country. In reality, however, the Gate of New China and the wall bearing Chairman Mao's handwriting serve yet another purpose; they are not just material *bearers* of a rhetorical meaning but also material *barriers* that mark out a boundary, that open and close, selectively include and exclude. Therefore, as barriers that hide the other side—the physicality of an imperial palace and the absolute power of a centralized government residing in it—they form a facade of hypocrisy that has an uneasy and precarious relationship with the meaning they bear, and consequently run the risk of subjecting that allegorical meaning, the political rhetoric and cultural myth of the People's New China, to the exposure of irony, the undoing of a devastating literalization.

The citizens of Beijing who pass the Gate of New China in their daily routines probably seldom reflect on the meaning of such architectural symbolism, but even if they do, in their quotidian sanity they would understand the gate and wall in a literal sense—namely, as barriers that mark out the boundary of a sacred enclosure, a modern Forbidden City from which the ordinary Chinese are strictly excluded.[30] The rhetorical meaning of the wall and the gate, the message that emanates so glaringly from Mao's gilded calligraphy, are not so much ignored as received and understood—that is, understood properly as sheer political rhetoric, as elevated words not to be taken literally. When the country as a whole seems to lie in a spiritual torpor, the tension between the literal and the rhetorical remains largely dormant; the rhetoric of political indoctrination has the look of high seriousness. It seems to reign supreme, and its self-inconsistency is not subjected to the damaging effect of a repressed Rabelaisian laughter.[31] In a time of crisis, however, such tension and inconsistency are no longer left unexposed and unexplored. When students and ordinary citizens in Beijing rose up to challenge the authority of China's communist leadership, one of the powerful means by which they

30. For an informative analysis of the architectural symbolism of Tiananmen Square, see Wu, "Tiananmen Square."

31. This is precisely what Paul Thompson noticed while teaching in Beijing: "Workers are officially described as 'masters of the enterprise.' But any mention of the term in workplace sessions I conducted for managers and employees while teaching and researching, produced nothing but contemptuous laughter" ("DPP," p. 17). For the famous analysis of the subversive Rabelaisian laughter, see Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World,* trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, Ind., 1984).

questioned the legitimacy of the regime was precisely a deliberate literal reading of political rhetoric, an ironic gesture that forced the meaning, or meaninglessness, of politically elevated words to unfold in public.

In late April 1989, when the students came to the Gate of New China to demand a dialogue with the government leaders, more soldiers were immediately sent to guard the gate and the wall that instructs them to "Serve the People." On 22 April, three student representatives attempted to make a petition, on their knees, on the steps in front of the Great Hall of the People, the building on one side of Tiananmen Square in which the People's Congress holds its meetings, and also the building from which, on 4 June, the riot police and soldiers dashed out to "clear" the square. The students' gesture, the usual ritual of prostration that ordinary people must perform before the emperor, stands out in sharp relief against the hollow name of the hall as well as the empty words cast on the wall at the Gate of New China. Such a gesture thus turns out to be not one of humiliation but a provocative gesture of irony that reveals the true relationship between the people of China and their leaders, a relationship not so different from the one in Old China despite all the political rhetoric to the contrary. These gestures, the literalization of political slogans and rhetoric, all have the symbolic force to disclose the true nature of the official culture of the People's Republic, a culture of a politically elevated People in which real people are subjugated by their alienated and "perverse double."[32] The decisive exposure of the totalitarian nature of this People's Republic, however, comes from the barrel of a gun, when the People's Liberation Army did shoot the people despite the logic of its name. If Marx were alive to see all this, he probably would be the first to disown such state powers of communism.

And yet, many American leftist intellectuals are disturbed, and their anxiety is genuine. "When Western political leaders and media are trumpeting a 'crisis of communism,'" Thompson puts it clearly and astutely, "the Left is understandably reluctant to appear to be endorsing their judgements" ("DPP," p. 26). Here we may have a sense of déjà vu, of seeing yet another rehearsal of the same kind of antagonistic mentality Lu Xun caricatured more than half a century ago. The antagonism here is of course not between the Chinese and the foreign but between the Left and

32. I borrow the term *perverse double* from Renate Lachmann's helpful interpretation of Bakhtin's study of the Rabelaisian folk culture as politically set against the official Soviet "folk" culture. To a large extent the rhetoric of the People's New China consists of borrowings from the Soviet, or rather Stalinist, version of the culture of the People [*narod*], which may explain why Bakhtin is especially helpful in demythologizing the cultural myth in China as well as in the Soviet Union. "The 'prevailing order' of Bakhtin's day," Lachmann says, "was that of a folk culture from which the folk had been banished and replaced by its perverse double: 'folklore'" (Renate Lachmann, "Bakhtin and Carnival: Culture as Counter-Culture," trans. Raoul Eshelman and Marc Davis, *Cultural Critique* 11 [Winter 1988–89]: 118).

the Right, the radical and the conservative; nevertheless, the absurdity and stupidity of such a mentality remain the same. It is unlikely that many American leftist intellectuals would know that satirical passage from Lu Xun, but they probably have read this widely popular quotation from Chairman Mao, which was included in *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung,* the "little red bible," back in the sixties: "We should support whatever the enemy opposes and oppose whatever the enemy supports."[33] This categorical statement of a political stance is logically dubious and practically inapplicable. The American Left would fall precisely into the pit of the *either / or*s if it appeared to endorse Chinese political leaders in order to oppose Western political leaders, to believe in the Chinese official media in order to mistrust Western media, and to deconstruct democracy in order to embrace "socialism."

But who is the real enemy? Where does that leave the Chinese students and the Chinese people? Should the American Left dismiss the whole mass movement in China, the former Soviet Union, and Eastern Europe as merely the "naive, idealistic clamor for democracy 'American style'"? And why should anyone hate democracy simply because it is "American" and "Western"? Or, to paraphrase Lu Xun, why should *we* eat flies simply because *they* emphasize hygiene? In much the same vein Liu Zaifu also asks, "Why should we send as gifts 'freedom,' 'democracy,' 'humanism,' 'love,' and all such beautiful words and concepts to the bourgeoisie?"[34] In facing the political situation in China and the other socialist countries, as Thompson argues,

> the Left not only needs to firmly back the reform process, but to finally dispense with talk of "bourgeois" democracy. There was nothing bourgeois about the freedoms to think, organize, demonstrate and choose a government being fought for by the people of Beijing and other cities. I believe that the people of China want a democratic socialism rather than a return to capitalism. But I also believe that they should have the right to choose. ["DPP," p. 26]

The question then becomes: Are the leftist intellectuals in the United States ready to grant the Chinese the right to choose? Is the American Left willing to look into the unpleasant reality in China rather than preserving its ideological purity intact "outside history"? This is, of course, by no means to forgo the critical responsibility of the intellectuals to criticize. The right to criticize political corruption and social evil without peril and retaliation is precisely what the Chinese intellectuals fight for in their

33. Mao Tse-tung, "Interview with Three Correspondents from the Central News Agency, the *Sao Tang Pao* and the *Hsin Min Pao,*" *Selected Works,* 4 vols. (Beijing, 1965), 2:272.

34. Liu, "Peiyu jianshexing de wenhua xingge" ["Cultivate a Constructive Character of Culture"], *Wenxue de fansi,* p. 161.

hope for democracy. And in that cause, they definitely need support from intellectuals and people all over the world. American leftist intellectuals can begin to dissolve their anxiety by refusing to be cornered in the mentality of the *either/ors*, the antagonistic mentality that Lu Xun urged us to discard. They will not find the behavior of the Chinese students disturbing once they stop misreading the symbolism the students use and stop judging according to Western critical standards what the Chinese do in China.

This is not to say that Western literary and cultural theories are useless in China. On the contrary, Western theory, when grabbed and assimilated by Chinese intellectuals, plays an important role in the cultural, ideological, and political transformations of China. The tremendous official Chinese resistance to Western theory already testifies to its power and relevance. But when theory travels to a different culture and plays a role in the transformation of that culture, theory itself is also transformed. The role of Western theory in China must therefore be understood and evaluated from a perspective grounded in Chinese reality. Otherwise it will only be misunderstood and misevaluated.

But what is Chinese reality, and for that matter, any reality? Given the skeptical and sometimes even agnostic attitude characteristic of much of contemporary Western theory, this seems a question to which any confident answer is likely to be contested by all sorts of theoretical inquisitions. Indeed, if the ability to analyze TV *representation* of reality *as fictionality* and to translate Chinese political events into the film language of *King Kong* is considered theoretical sophistication, any argument for the existence of reality outside the textuality of fictionalizing representation will surely appear naive and superficial. After all, I was watching the events at Tiananmen Square on a color TV in the United States, far from the danger of the immediate political confrontation in China. How can I be sure that what I was watching was really not Tiananmen but *King Kong?* How can I be sure that there *was* a massacre in Beijing? I did not die in Beijing in June 1989, and those who did cannot come to America to bear witness to their own deaths. How can I be sure that here we are not facing again a theoretically interesting aporia where, as Shoshana Felman puts it so beautifully with regard to the Holocaust, there is a "radical impossibility of witnessing"?[35] But being a Chinese who grew up on the mainland, I am afraid that to indulge in such profound theoretical meditations is an intellectual luxury I can neither afford nor care to procure.

35. Shoshana Felman, "Paul de Man's Silence," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (Summer 1989): 744. For a response to Felman, see Susan Tarrow, "Editorial Note," *Critical Inquiry* 16 (Spring 1990): 690. It is not without certain qualms that I have quoted Felman's felicitous phrase here because I, along with Tarrow, may have given her notion a mere "misreading" and "a grave simplification," for "the radical impossibility of witnessing," according to Felman, is "a notion whose complexity can neither be reduced to the simplicity of a positivistic statement nor defined as my 'conclusion'" (Felman, "Editorial Note," *Critical Inquiry*

Vis-à-vis the sophisticated argument for the impossibility of reality, then, I shall not suggest that we simply call a spade a spade but that we extend our skepticism to the theory that relinquishes any hope of knowing and therefore acting on and making changes in reality. To be sure, no one can claim to know the totality of what is real in one's individual understanding, but that ought not paralyze and trap us in a vertiginous reflection on the endless deferring of the real in our necessarily finite knowledge. The stakes are simply too high. Instead I would suggest that Chinese reality, not unlike the Chinese philosophical notion of *tao,* exists nowhere and everywhere; nothing contains it in totality but everything bears it in part. Reality exists, as the philosopher Zhuangzi (369?–286? B.C.) says in a deliberate decrescendo of the mysterious *tao,* in even the smallest and meanest part of our world: in ants, in weeds, in earthen ware, in urine, and in excrement.[36] It exists, quite simply, in our daily experience of the world and constitutes the circumstances, the physical, social, and cultural environment of our lives, the very condition and substance of our being.

What I am calling reality here is similar to what Said calls the world, and I believe that it is important to reiterate the point he makes about the "worldliness" or "circumstantiality" of texts, that "texts are worldly, to some degree they are events, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted."[37] As critics and scholars we may have different interpretations of the world and the events that happen in it, but the existence of the world and events is beyond question and, ultimately, it is reality or the world that places constraints on our interpretations. Chinese reality and what happened in June 1989 in Beijing, then, are not just a series of flickering pictures on the TV screen but are rooted in the social and political history of China, and the analysis of TV representation of the events in Beijing, no matter how profound and sophisticated it may appear, will only be truly superficial if it takes TV texts as mere fictional representations without a trace of their worldliness and circumstantiality, and if it says nothing about the social and political history of China that gradually but inevitably led to the confrontation in Tiananmen.

16 [Spring 1990]: 690). By adding the epithet *radical* to the word *impossibility,* the whole notion is instantly transferred to a level of complexity that cannot be reached by its critics. Like the Holocaust that is impossible to witness, "the radical impossibility of witnessing" is itself impossible to be grasped; it is protected, as it were, by a radical impossibility of argument. It will therefore invariably appear simplistic and superficial to question such a complex notion and its claim to radical complexity.

36. See Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi jishi* [*Variorum Edition of the Zhuangzi*], ed. Guo Qingfan, vol. 3 of *Zhuzi jicheng* [*Collection of Classics*] (Beijing, 1954), p. 326.

37. Said, "Introduction: Secular Criticism," *The World, the Text, and the Critic,* p. 4.

If we do not negate the reality of political confrontation, how then should a truly oppositional discourse operate to engage itself in such a confrontation? If the Chinese students are opposed to the brute force of a state machine, it should follow that the oppositional discourse that speaks for the Chinese should also be courageously opposed to the same state machine and reenact the same opposition on the level of discursive theoretical analysis. This is what Western oppositional discourse does in the West, notably feminism, African-American criticism, gay and lesbian studies, Marxist literary criticism, and other politically leftist theories. Reading Chow's essay and Mitchell's endorsement, however, I find it hard to understand why they should stop at opposition when they confront the political reality in China. Could it be, as Bruce Robbins argues, that oppositional discourse is requisite for the literary profession, that "the words 'oppositional' and 'professional' are not antithetical"?[38] In other words, within the academic institution of the Western university and its professional literary critics, oppositional discourse is precisely conformist as professional performance; it is doing what the profession requires, which has nothing to do with Chinese reality. "The thrust of the argument is to take any merit away from opposition; in being oppositional, [Stanley] Fish says, you are just following the profession's orders."[39] There is a certain danger in this argument that forecloses any possibility of genuine opposition in critical discourse, which cannot be totally compromised by being cast as professional performance. And yet the question remains: How does one relate the oppositional discourse as professional performance in American academia to the political opposition in the real world? We now seem to return to the initial question of traveling theory: What can and does Western theory do in the cultural and political environment of China?

Said's idea, as I see it, of texts as worldly events and as placing themselves in the world emphasizes the actual force of texts to make a difference in the transformation of reality. The force of texts as texts, however, is not physical but mental, not material but spiritual. This is significant because the immateriality of texts as ideas and theories makes it impossible for any state power to completely block the traveling of theory and to effectively stop the dissemination of ideas that may have potentially subversive implications. In China, historical evidence goes a long way back to the very first centralized state power under Qin Shi Huangdi, China's first emperor (third century B.C.), who not only initiated the project of building the Great Wall to ward off the physical force of the nomadic tribes coming from the northern steppes but also burned books in order to eliminate the

38. Bruce Robbins, "Oppositional Professionals: Theory and the Narratives of Professionalization," in *Consequences of Theory*, ed. Jonathan Arac and Barbara Johnson (Baltimore, 1991), p. 4.

39. Ibid., p. 12.

spiritual force of ideas in China. The Great Wall was never really the effective deterrent it was designed to be, and the burning of books was a complete failure. The spiritual edifice of ideas and theories cannot be destroyed by material fires, and that is bad news for all thought police and controllers of ideas, whether they are the first emperor of China, the Roman Catholic Index compilers, Adolf Hitler, or Mao and his Red Guards. The problem the Chinese government has with the metaphorical "spiritual pollution" lies precisely in its metaphoricity, in the fact that the pollution is spiritual. In fact, the spiritual force of ideas and theories manifests itself most powerfully when it is engaged in the opposition to cultural orthodoxy, when it appeals to our critical consciousness, which, as Said observes, is nothing but "an unstoppable predilection for alternatives" ("TT," p. 247). Reading contemporary Chinese literature and criticism, the search for alternatives is everywhere apparent and unstoppable in all their stylistic, methodological, and ideological experiments. Ultimately, in the light of such opposition and antagonism, of such a pursuit of alternatives, we must understand the meaning of Western theory and the role it plays *within* the cultural and political environment of China.